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UKRAINIAN AND BELARUS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: PRELUDE TO A CRISIS IN THE WESTERN BORDERLANDS OF RUSSIA

An Immediate Aftermath of Elections

Dr. Jacob W. Kipp
Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.
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In his address to the Polish Sejm last week in Warsaw President Clinton pledged to support the fledgling democracies of Central and Eastern Europe through a three-prong policy of "supporting democracy, advancing free markets and meeting new security challenges." Clinton described the looming security challenge in Europe as a struggle against "would-be dictators and fiery nationalists . . . promoting ethnic and racial hatred, promoting religious divisions and anti-semitism and aggressive nationalism." From these sources arise those challenges that threatens the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the states of Central and Eastern Europe as they go about the business of building democracies and free-market economies. Clinton declared: "No democracy in this region should ever be consigned to a gray area or a buffer zone, and no country should have the right to veto, compromise or threaten democratic Poland's or any other democracy's integration into Western institutions, including those that ensure our security." ¹

This position assumes that consignment of a state or states to a gray area is a function of the actions of another power. But the question of internal stability, i. e., the degree of popular support that the state or states enjoy from their populations and their commitment to the maintenance of their nation's independence, can be a function of internal factors tied to a complex set of circumstances. One need only remember that although Gorbachev's referendum on the preservation of a reformed Union won handily in the spring of 1991, the union itself was swept away by very crisis induced by trying to reform the union, leading to the events of August and the ensuing upsurge of nationalism.

The recent election results in Belarus and Ukraine seem to suggest that the victors in these elections will seek closer ties with Russia. The prime question is with what Russia will they seek those ties, i. e., Yeltsin's reformist-democratic Russia, Rutskoi's or Ziuganov's renewed Union dominated by Russia, or Zhirinovsky's restored empire. The very process of defining with which Russia these states will seek closer ties will create a tension within these societies between those who view national independence as vital to their security [personal safety, status, and livelihood] and those who would sacrifice some measure of independence to ensure increased social security [increased income, job security, and economic stability]. In the case of Ukraine the issue is

entwined in the regionalization of national politics among a nationalist, western-oriented Galicia, a Russian and Russified east and south, and a moderate central region with its core around Kiev. The fate of Belarus and Ukraine will impact upon the security concerns of the Baltic states, Poland and the other Visegrad states. It will have profound ramifications for Russian domestic politics, putting on the agenda the question of a confederative or imperial approach to re-incorporation.

The results of recent presidential elections in Belarus and Ukraine point to a political crisis along Russia's Western borderland as new governments try to overcome economic collapse, redefine relations with Russia, and seek to direct the anger and frustration among the electorate which they mobilized to get elected. The anger and the frustration, which is real and genuine among the mass of the population in both states, were aimed at three targets: organized crime, corrupt officials, and economic mismanagement. In both countries nationalists, who came to power promoting the end of the Soviet Union, were voted out on the basis of the poor performance of their governments and the catastrophic decline in each national economy. In both cases the electoral results came as something of a surprise. In Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko emerged as a dark-horse candidate late in the process and was swept into office in a land-slide victory. In Ukraine the reports of election results in the first round of presidential elections on June 26, in which the incumbent, Leonid Kravchuk, emerged as the leader with a plurality of 38%, revealed a tight race. Analysts continued to predict a victory for President Kravchuk in the run-off elections in July. In both the Belarus and Ukrainian elections there was considerable evidence that the Russian government favored moderates and incumbents associated with the decision to dissolve the union in December 1991.

Lukashenko's Election in Belarus

In Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko, a 39-year-old crusader against corruption and former state farm manager, made a campaign against corruption into a mass protest, getting 80% of the total vote. His opponent, the incumbent prime minister Vyacheslav Kebich got just 14% of the final vote. Speaking on the outcome of the voting Stanislav Shushkevich, independent Belarus' first president, said on Sunday: "People are fed up with government policies and they have chosen the most radical destroyer of those policies."

Lukashenko is a national populist, whose style resembles that of Zhirinovsky: recognize popular grievances, offer simple solutions, and focus public attention on those who have conspired to create the problems, making it a struggle between the corrupt few and the people. In a bitter personal campaign Lukashenko escaped the many charges leveled against him and convinced the public that he was the victim of a conspiracy of the corrupt.

Like Zhirinovsky, he spoke of renewed ties between Belarus and Russia. Indeed, the reformist press in Moscow, which early on labeled Lukashenko "the Belorussian Zhirinovsky" for his combination of populist and extremist rhetoric, gained another reason to compare the two: "like the Russian 'liberal-democrat' [he has] the ability to deliver electoral surprises." ²

"Presidential" Moscow [Yeltsin and his supporters, Chernomyrdin's government, Russia's Choice, and other reformist elements] had favored Kebich as a moderate and competent

reformer. Kebich's political annihilation is another blow to moderate reformers and will be so seen in Moscow. Lukashenko's overwhelming victory means that he will have a chance to impose a government of his choice on the Belarus parliament. He will be likely to seek closer ties with national-populist forces in Russia and promote closer union with them. Lukashenko already declared the monetary agreement signed by Kebich and Chernomyrdin last year to be "a fig leaf used to further Kebich's presidential campaign." While rejecting the reconstitution of the Union, he has left the door open to some new formula for uniting the former Soviet republics, one that would maintain the independent statehood of Belarus and the other successor states.³ The leader of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party is reportedly pleased with the result of the voting in Belarus. One of the leaders of that party, Aleksandr Vengerovsky, said that he liked Lukashenko because "he is an intelligent person with good experience." Comments of other Russian politicians such as the Chairman of the Duma Committee for CIS Affairs, Konstantin Zatulin, stressed Lukashenko's unpredictability.

What unites the electoral results in Belarus and Ukraine are the issues of economic collapse, corruption, and popular frustration. What makes the dynamics of the elections and their impact different is the centrality of ethnic issues for Ukraine. Belarus is a relatively more homogeneous nation, while Ukraine's politics is dominated by ethnic divisions among the eastern, central, and western regions of the country. As in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe Communists and reformed Communists have emerged as political powers by championing a return to order and stability.

This process is underway in Ukraine but with a difference, since the Communist Party apparatus never lost power under Kravchuk. Instead, we have the industrial-technocrats and local party officials replacing them. The old Supreme Rada, elected under Perestroika, represented the old party nomenklatura and spent its years in power feathering its nest. They fiddled while the Ukrainian economy burned and crisis became collapse. In the end, voters could not identify with and did not trust their elected representatives. In the spring of 1994, after a second round of voting for parliament by far the largest single group of seats filled with candidates who declared their party affiliation [193 out of the 328 seats filled to date] went to the Communists (86) with left parties of various persuasions holding 124 seats, the center parties 62 seats, and the nationalist right 5 seats. Public opinion polls taken at the same time suggested a radical decline in public confidence in political institutions and leaders. [Presidency got only 13% and the cabinet of ministers only 7% in that poll.]⁴ This became a key factor in the final outcome of the recent presidential elections.

Kuchma's Election in Ukraine

The election of Leonid D. Kuchma, a former prime minister and military-industrial manager, over Leonid M. Kravchuk, Ukraine's first elected-president and former Communist apparatchik, by a margin of 52 to 45 percent confirmed the deep regional cleavage within Ukrainian society between those who seek a unilateral, Ukrainian-national road and those who want closer economic and political ties with Russia. The voter breakdown provided by William Connor underscores the regional dynamics with the east [large Russian minorities and Russified Ukrainians] joined by Crimea and Odessa in the south voting for Kuchma and close ties to Russia. In Central Ukraine, including the Kiev region, the electoral results were much closer

with the balancing shifting between Kravchuk and Kuchma. Public opinion polling in the spring had suggested that three issues would dominate the election: "economic crisis, relations with Russia, and crime."⁵

In Kiev area and Western Ukraine potential voters identified as priority issues: the armed forces, territorial integrity and support for religion. Western Ukraine and the south around Odessa also supported economic reform as a high priority. In Eastern and Southern Ukraine and Crimea the fight against Crime was given top priority.

Two issues are at the heart of Ukrainian politics: the definition of the state's nature: ethno-national versus territorial, unitary versus federal; and the path of economic reform and revival. Reactions to the results of the elections suggested just how strongly these issues are tied to internal and external politics. Moderates from Central Ukraine spoke of their hope for a stable and orderly transfer of power. Kuchma himself understands the danger of a geographic/ethnic split within Ukraine and stated that he would address the danger. "If we act intelligently we can overcome this split." The leader of RUKH -the Ukrainian nationalist organization with strong roots in Galicia, Vyacheslav Chornovil, on the other hand, was cited by Interfax as saying that his organization had no intention of cooperating with Kuchma and the new administration, while the leader of the Crimean Tartars, Mustafa Dzhamilyev, said Kuchma's election could lead to the further deterioration of the situation in Crimea. The leader of the Ukrainian Civil Congress of Crimea, Serhii Litvin, said the same. Outside of Ukraine, the Yeltsin administration signaled its support for Kravchuk by favoring the incumbent in the news coverage of Russian national television. On the other hand, in the aftermath of the election, the leader of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, expressed pleasure at Kuchma's election.

While trying to reassure RUKH, the nationalist movement that began the political drive for Ukrainian independence during Perestroika, and the population of Eastern Ukraine that he will not sacrifice Ukrainian independence even as he seeks closer economic ties with Russia, Kuchma will have to avoid the mine fields of the Black Sea Fleet, the status of Sevastopol, the challenge to central authority implicit in Crimean President Yurii Meshkov's claims of greater autonomy, and the tangle of ethnic relations in Crimea among Russians, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tartars. The level of violence in Crimea has escalated since December last year and involves bombings, assassinations, and armed attacks carried out by extremist elements of all three ethnic communities against each other. *Segodnya*, a leading independent Moscow newspaper, reported just days after the election that Ukrainian Ministry of Defense was involved in a plot to kill Kuchma in case of his election as President of Ukraine. The article contained a copy of a secret document supposedly passed on by the head of military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Oleksandr Skipalsky, to the Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's armed forces, President Leonid Kravchuk. The Ukrainian MOD subsequently denied the report and condemned the article as "provocative sensational, and inaccurate."⁶ It attacked the Russian newspaper for engaging in a provocation against Ukraine and its government. Whatever the truth of the story, its very existence suggests a stormy connection between Russian and Ukrainian domestic politics.

Some analysts and politicians in Kiev are arguing that Ukraine, and especially Eastern Ukraine, are such economic basket cases that Russia's government has no real desire or incentive to push closer ties. This argument ignores the domestic politics angle and the ability of extreme

nationalists to use Russians in the near abroad to embarrass Yeltsin and his government. This has been the case since the fighting around Bendery in Moldova in June 1992 and continues to be so. Thus, ties between Russia and Crimea/Eastern Ukraine are not going to be decided by narrow economic criteria.

Moreover, for heavy industry and the military-industrial complex in Ukraine ties with Russia offer the only prospect for short-term survival, given the criteria that the IMF and World Bank have applied to economic reform and development in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, ties with Western defense industries which have been developed in some Visegrad states and Russia, where economic reform, marketization, and privatization have gone hand-in-hand with defense-industry restructuring, have been delayed in Ukraine because of slow base of economic reform in general. It is far easier to seek to revive the connections that existed under the Soviet Union than to adapt the pieces of defense industry which Ukraine inherited to a coherent defense-procurement program and relate it to a strategy for privatization and marketization.

Conclusion

In both Belarus and Ukraine the populous voted out of anger and frustration, and it remains to be seen whether the new governments will be able to solve the problems of declining production, falling wages, and hyper inflation. In both cases the problems of corruption and crime were given significant play by the winners. In both cases it is quite unclear whether the new presidents will be able to deal with these problems. Moreover, it remains to be seen how Russia will greet these victories. While there is little or no support for the revival of the union as empire in Belarus and Ukraine, there are groups who could look to economic ties associated with private interests and market forces that would great closer ties warmly. There is, however, little eagerness on the part of Russian leaders to assume the burden of funding the transformation of the rust-belt industrial regions in both countries. In short, both sides have motives to avoid a rapid and unplanned remarriage. Some observers are more pessimistic on this point. Ian Brzezinski, an advisor to the Ukrainian government on security policy, suggested that economic re-incorporation of Ukraine in to Russia would have dramatic consequences if Ukraine returned to Russian control.

An economic Curzon line would be drawn in European affairs, the CIS would be revitalized and economic sovereignty would be surrendered to Moscow. This would translate eventually into political and military influence. Ukraine would be more involved with CIS security affairs than NATO's Partnership for Peace it recently signed up for.

This would give legitimacy to Russian imperialists along the lines of Vladimir Zhirinovsky who believe that Russia should re-build an empire. It would also add to regional instability as it would tie Ukraine to a failing economy.⁷

The dilemma with Brzezinski's analysis is that Ukraine is already a failed economy since the Kravchuk government undertook no major reforms. Russia in this case is, in fact, the model for market economy reform. Brzezinski seems to suppose that re-incorporation would lead to a rejection of Russia on political grounds. But if such re-incorporation were voluntary then the West would be hard pressed to object to close Russian-Ukrainian ties based by market relations

and commercial trade. Moreover, the \$4.2 billion in aid promised by the G-7 to Ukraine at the recent Naples Summit seems to suggest a Western priority that is economic and not political, i. e., get the national economy into reform process and restore production. Brzezinski is on safer ground when he asserts that a Russia which re-incorporated Ukraine and Belarus would draw a new Curzon line, but he misses the point in speaking about an economic line. The line will be political and it will challenge the West's attempt to manage gradual integration of Central and Eastern Europe via EU and NATO associate status. Neither move will be sufficient in light of a Russia march west. Economics may drive the march but security guarantees will become the language. And short of such guarantees the states of Central and Eastern Europe will slip more and more into a gray area security vacuum and buffer zone against which President Clinton warned in Warsaw.

The implications of the appearance of a gray zone in Central and Eastern Europe with a zone of conflict and imperial re-incorporation just beyond it are stark. The re-nationalization of security policy in Europe can be expected, as can pressure for a distinctly German approach to the emerging buffer zone. Having failed to anchor Atlanticism in a new security system for Europe, the US will be faced with the daunting task of re-generating the will for collective defense, when the venue has shifted to a region that many West European states see as beyond the limits of their interests and influence. In that case it will particularly difficult to generate broad domestic support for a pro-active policy toward the region in response to imperial reconstitution. While it is relatively easy to address responses to scenarios involving forced re-integration with Russia in a new union or empire, it much more difficult to articulate a US policy to deal with the most likely outcome: a domestic crisis within Ukraine over a policy of economic cooperation and political cooperation with Russia, which would break on regional lines and pit Ukrainian nationalists in the west against the large, pro-Russian elements in the east and south. Such a situation will have a high risk of civil war and will raise fears in Central and Eastern Europe to a fever pitch. It will much more ambiguous than overt Russian military intervention and will place pressure on all parties to act but leave little room for compromise and conflict management. Thus, prudent and timely consultations beginning with Germany and extending to England, France and other NATO partners should begin immediately. Given Poland's key role as a bridge to the East, such consultations should extend to include Warsaw's views on the prospects for the unfolding of this crisis. The US should be ready to mobilize a common approach to the issue of reconstitution among the Visegrad states, the Baltic troika, Romania, and Moldova. US opinion leaders should also be brought into the process of articulating and generating support for a policy of engagement in the struggle over the fate of the borderlands.

ENDNOTES

1. "President Clinton [sic] Address to the Polish Parliament," (Warsaw, 7 July 1994), p. 8. [BACK](#)
2. Galina Koval'skaya, "Fenomen Lukashenko," *Novoye vremya*, No. 26 (1994), p.10. [BACK](#)
3. RE/RL Daily Report, No. 134, (18 July 1994). [BACK](#)
4. "Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections, March/April 1994," *Ukrainian Business Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 1994), pp. 23-24. [BACK](#)

5 . Ibid., p. 23. [BACK](#)

6 . RE/RL Daily Report, No. 132, (14 July 1994). [BACK](#)

7. "Interview with Ian Brzezinski," *Ukrainian Business Review*, Vol 2, No 2 (Summer 1994), p. 28.[BACK](#)